



Big fish: An Archaic fish grill from Apollonia Pontica (Sozopol, Bulgaria)

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a fragmentary terracotta object, identified as a fish grill, discovered on the island of St Kirik in a context dated to the late 6th – early 5th c. BC. It adds to the extremely modest collection of such finds that seem to originate from Miletos, Apollonia's metropolis, and were transferred from there to Milesian *apoikiai* – Borysthenes (the island of Berezan), Pantikapaion, and Nymphaion in the Black Sea region, along with only a couple of other sites. While at other places the use of such utensils seems to have died away with the Archaic period, in Apollonia it persisted in the later Classical and Hellenistic times, attested by similar fish grills regularly discovered in ritual fireplaces in the necropolis. The new find from the island of St Kirik allows for tracing this practice to a much earlier period, presumably in a domestic context, and provides an opportunity to take a new look at these intriguing artefacts.

KEYWORDS

Apollonia Pontica, Greek colonisation, Miletos, Archaic Black Sea, ancient Greek culinary practices

Introduction: Fish grills in Apollonia

Apollonia Pontica (present-day Sozopol, Bulgaria) has long been known for a particular category of finds from contexts associated with commemorative rituals in the Classical and Early Hellenistic necropolis – the so-called “ritual fireplaces”. These were remains of *enagismoi/enagismata* – food offerings for the dead, where the actual food was burnt at the spot together with the bowls and plates used for serving it, but also with cooking ware and other utensils used for its preparation (see last in Damyanov 2023, 9–14).

Among the latter, undoubtedly most intriguing is a group of elongated, boat-shaped terracotta objects with barred open-work bases, usually considered to be fish grills – an interpretation that was tentatively proposed, among others, already in the earliest publication discussing such a find from the early 20th c., unique at that time (Seure 1924, 333–335, fig. 89; see Baralis et al. 2019, 300, cat. 349). However, an interpretation as a (votive funerary?) model of a boat was not abandoned for several more decades (for the same object, see Frel 1960, 250, no. 44, fig. 4).

In later times, such finds became more numerous due to the large-scale investigations of the necropolis of Apollonia, first in the 1940s, then from the 1990s onwards, and they firmly entered scholarly literature as “fish grills”. In all cases with secure contexts, grills were discovered in ritual fireplaces (Panayotova 2003, 136; see Panayotova 2007, 111, fig. 4.5), which makes their relation to food preparation

quite obvious; some have been reported only as found “outside of graves” (Venedikov 1948, 25, fig. 28; Ivanov 1963, 264–266, nos 772–777; pl. 133; Hermary et al. 2010, 253, TC 21–27, pls 70f, 123.a–d; Claquin 2015, 487–488, figs 8–9).

While certain doubts about the utilitarian use of such objects as actual fish grills still linger even in recent publications (Hermary et al. 2010, 172; Claquin 2015, 485; 2019, 193), the recent positive identification of fish remains in ritual fireplaces (Panayotova et al. 2021b, 567; Baralis et al. 2025, 70) seems to support the already accepted interpretation – together with written sources mentioning fish as offering to the dead (Kastanayan 1950, 131–132; Ekroth 2002, 88; Panayotova 2003, 136).

Fish grills vary both in size and quality of manufacture, from smallish (less than 15 cm long) and crudely made (see for example Claquin 2015, fig. 8.2) to quite large, up to 40 cm long, and more elaborately crafted, some with the upper edge decorated with groups of notches (see Nedyalkov 2020, 190, nos 276–277, Table 35–36; Baralis et al. 2019, 194–195, cat. 205).

The chronology of the published well-dated (by context) grills ranges from the first quarter of the 4th c. BC (Hermary et al. 2010, TC 21, 22, 24–26) to the first half of the 3rd c. BC (see Claquin 2015, 487–488, fig. 8; for a revised chronology of the same assemblages, see Damyanov 2023, 84–86). Thus, it was not as short-lived a phenomenon, as suggested in some earlier publications (Panayotova 2003, 136; Hermary et al. 2010, 173). Also, it cannot be excluded that some already known fish grills may be earlier than that (see below).

What certainly deserves attention is that fish grills have been considered typical only of the necropolis of Apollonia, which has led to the assumption that they may have played a specific function in the commemorative rituals (Panayotova 2007, 111; Hermary et al. 2010, 172–173; Knight 2022, 313–314). In this respect, even more notable is the lack of such objects from other contemporary Greek necropoleis in the Black Sea (and elsewhere). This absence would rather speak against a well-defined ritual function of these objects within the ancient Greek burial customs, making the case of Apollonia even more puzzling.

It should be remembered also that there are practically no published in detail domestic contexts from Apollonia from this period, which impedes making an adequate comparison between the *enagismata* in the necropolis and ancient Apollonians’ everyday culinary practices. While selected cooking vessels from the city have been included in more general publications (for example in Nedyalkov 2008 and 2020), there is only one urban site in Apollonia, where more attention has been paid to cooking ware and equipment, dated mostly to the Late Archaic and Early Classical periods (Claquin 2015, 485–487, figs 6–7; 2016, 128–130). There, a poorly preserved fragmentary object has been tentatively identified as some kind of grill (Claquin 2015, 485, fig. 3.1), although definitely not a fish grill (as seemingly hinted in Knight 2022, 314), as it does not resemble the known examples from other contemporary sites, thus failing to provide a retrospection for the finds from the later Classical and Early Hellenistic necropolis.

Here is the other intriguing aspect of the fish grills. Certainly, the Apollonian finds are not unique and they have forbearers that have been discovered, first and foremost, in Miletos, Apollonia’s metropolis, and also on a limited number of sites in the Black Sea region, related to Milesian colonisation or overseas activities (the island of Berezan, Pantikapaion, and Nymphaion¹, to be commented upon in more detail below). There is one fragmentary example also from Naukratis (Thomas n.d., 1)², and yet another isolated Archaic example has been discovered in Klazomenai, again in Ionian setting (Özbilen

1 Nymphaion was certainly an Ionian *apoikia*, but its Milesian foundation is only presumed, as there is no unequivocal evidence to support it – see Avram et al. 2004, 948, no. 704.

2 A large fragment now kept in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (Accession Number 88.893) – <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/130745/fragment-of-a-cooking-stand> [visited on April 21, 2026].

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2003)³. These finds, however, date exclusively from the Archaic times – in fact, the main reference publication for the finds from Miletos concludes that the production of the fish-shaped grills there was discontinued before the middle of the 5th c. BC (Aydemir 2005, 94). Thus, there seems to be a double gap between these early fish grills and the later ones, discovered only in the Apollonian necropolis – a chronological one of about a century, but also a spatial one, as until recently no Archaic examples were known from Apollonia.

This brings us to the main aim of the present paper – to partially close that gap by presenting a fragmentary fish grill discovered in 2025 during the investigations on the island of St Kirik that have revealed remains of Archaic and Classical Apollonia, including early houses and the main temenos of the city (see Panayotova et al. 2014; Stoyanova, Damyanov 2021; 2023; Damyanov 2024).

The fish grill from the island of St Kirik

Unfortunately, the fish grill is only partially preserved – a total of six fragments from the front part, five of them joining (fig. 1). It is made of paste of light red colour after firing (surface – 2.5 YR 6/6 light red; core – 2.5 YR 6/4 light reddish brown), with large amount of very fine mica, white inclusions (probably limestone), and darker reddish inclusions (grog?). The dimensions (of the joining fragments) are as follows: preserved length 17.8 cm, preserved width 9.6 cm, height 5.8 cm, and thickness of the wall about 1 cm.

There is no coating and the surface, while not particularly coarse, has not been polished additionally; on the outside, there are traces from the moulding of the object. There are no visible traces of secondary burning. One interesting detail regarding the manufacture of the fish grill could be observed on the underside, with visible deeply incised lines, apparently made before the firing and outlining a pattern of triangular cut-outs that differs from the one that was eventually implemented. These traces of the abandoned design were not smoothed (fig. 1.c).

The grill has a flat, just slightly concave base and outward slanting sides, with triangular openings cut into them – a single row of triangles of alternating orientation on the sides, and most probably three (two are preserved) longitudinal rows on the base, the middle one of triangles pointing backwards and those to the sides of triangles pointing to the front. The single preserved fragment of the side indicates that its top was notched, at least at some places.

A tentative partial reconstruction is proposed (fig. 2), based on the reconstructions published by A. Aydemir of grills from Miletos (Aydemir 2005, Abb. 11 and 15). The overall design should be symmetrical, hence the reconstruction of three rows of triangular cut-outs on the base, similar to Aydemir's cat. 5. Then, for the general shape, the reconstructed outlines of Aydemir's cat. 5 and 7 were used. Aydemir's reconstruction seems to be supported by the best-preserved fish grill of this type – from Pantikapaion in the Black Sea, unfortunately known only from a photo published more than a century ago (OAK 1898, 15, fig. 8). The notched top edge of the side walls is typical of all fish grills from the period. The same is true of the triangular cut-outs on the base and the sides – the best parallel of the alternating arrangement on the sides of the grill from Apollonia is Aydemir's cat. 5.

Based on the reconstruction, the dimensions of the original object would be about 40 cm long and about 18 cm wide at the top (about 12 cm at the base). Certainly, these are only approximate, but they are close enough to those of other partially preserved pieces. It would be among the largest of the known examples, but the above-mentioned find from Naukratis (with height of 7.5 cm and two tiers of triangular cut-outs on the side) reveals the existence of even larger similar utensils.

3 It dates from the 6th c. BC and is identical to the Milesian examples – personal communication from Dr. Günsel Özbilen Güngör, to whom I am grateful for this information.

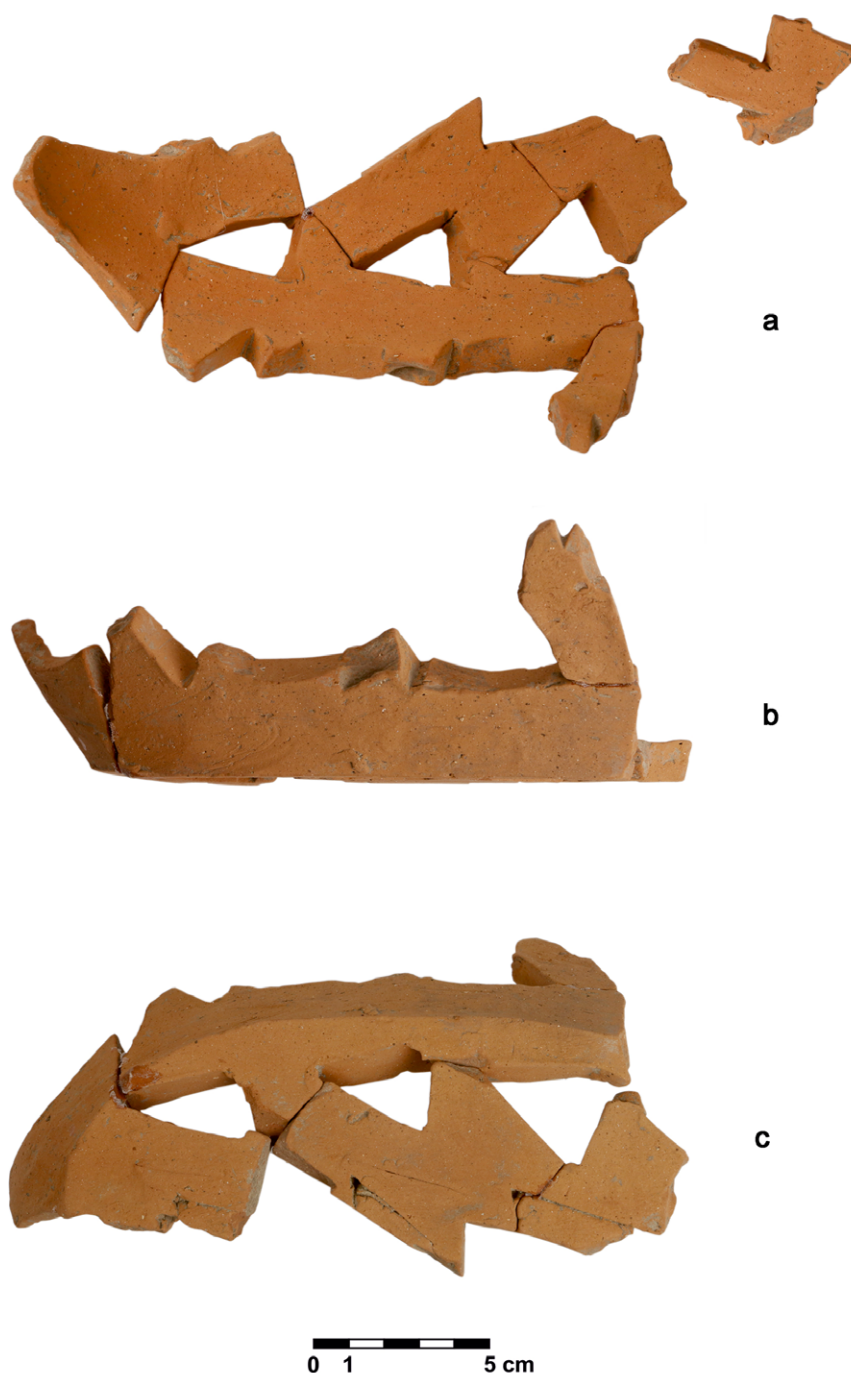


Fig. 1. Terracotta fish grill from the island of St Kirik (author M. Damyanov)

Chronology

The chronology of the Apollonian grill also corresponds well to the already known examples. Those from Miletos belong to the Archaic period, and one of them is dated to the second quarter of the 5th c. BC based on context (Aydemir 2005, 92, 98, cat. 5–7); however, this latter dating should be considered only as *terminus ante quem*. The fragment from the Naukratis is also from the 6th c. BC, as is the one from Klazomenai.

Unfortunately, some of the Black Sea finds were discovered in mixed contexts that do not allow for more precise dating – for example the grill from Pantikapaion (OAK 1898, 15, fig. 8) and the frag-

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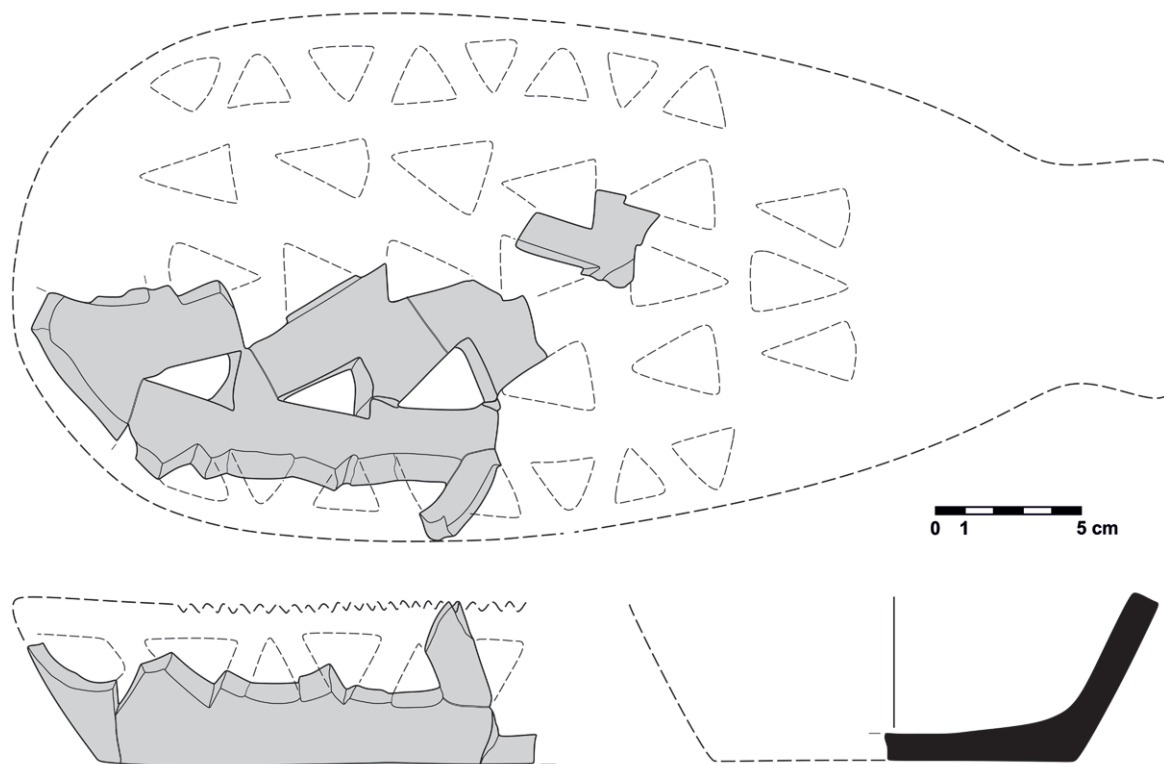


Fig. 2. Terracotta fish grill from the island of St Kirik, drawing and partial reconstruction (author M. Damyanov)

ment from Nymphaion (Chetverkina 2019, 116, 122, fig. 1.1). However, the grills from Berezan offer better chronology: one fragment was discovered in a layer from a large fire dated to the last quarter of the 6th c. BC, and another one comes from a late 6th – early 5th c. BC context (Chistov et al. 2015, 17, fig. 5.5–7; 2020, 110, 161, pls 76.7, 108.16).

Practically the same date could be assigned to the grill from the island of St Kirik. It was discovered in a layer associated with major transformations here, when part of the settlement was abandoned and razed to the ground in order to open space for a larger temenos and the construction of the earliest known stone temple and altar. This happened at some point about 500 BC (see Stoyanova, Damyanov 2023, 211–213, fig. 11). The fish grill come from the layer that overlies immediately the foundations of the dismantled houses to the east of the large altar, levelling the terrain (fig. 3).

The same layer yielded also a fragment of the well-known terracotta frieze with warriors (fig. 4.1), dated to the late 6th c. BC (see Stoyanova, Damyanov 2021, 15–16; Panayotova et al. 2021a, 608). Other contexts related to this major construction phase in the temenos have yielded fragments of the frieze, confirming the proposed chronology (Stoyanova, Damyanov 2023, 211, fig. 10). Also revealing is the fragment from an Attic black-glaze echinus wall saltcellar from the early 5th c. BC (cf. Sparkes, Talcott 1970, nos 901–903), which seems to be the latest find from the layer (fig. 4.2). As the fish grill was discarded in this layer already in fragmentary state, an earlier date in the late 6th c. BC seems perfectly acceptable. Based on context, a domestic use in the early settlement could be presumed.

Discussion

The fortunate discovery of the Archaic fish grill on the island of St Kirik enables taking a new look at this specific Apollonian group of finds, attesting to the early origins of a culinary practice that

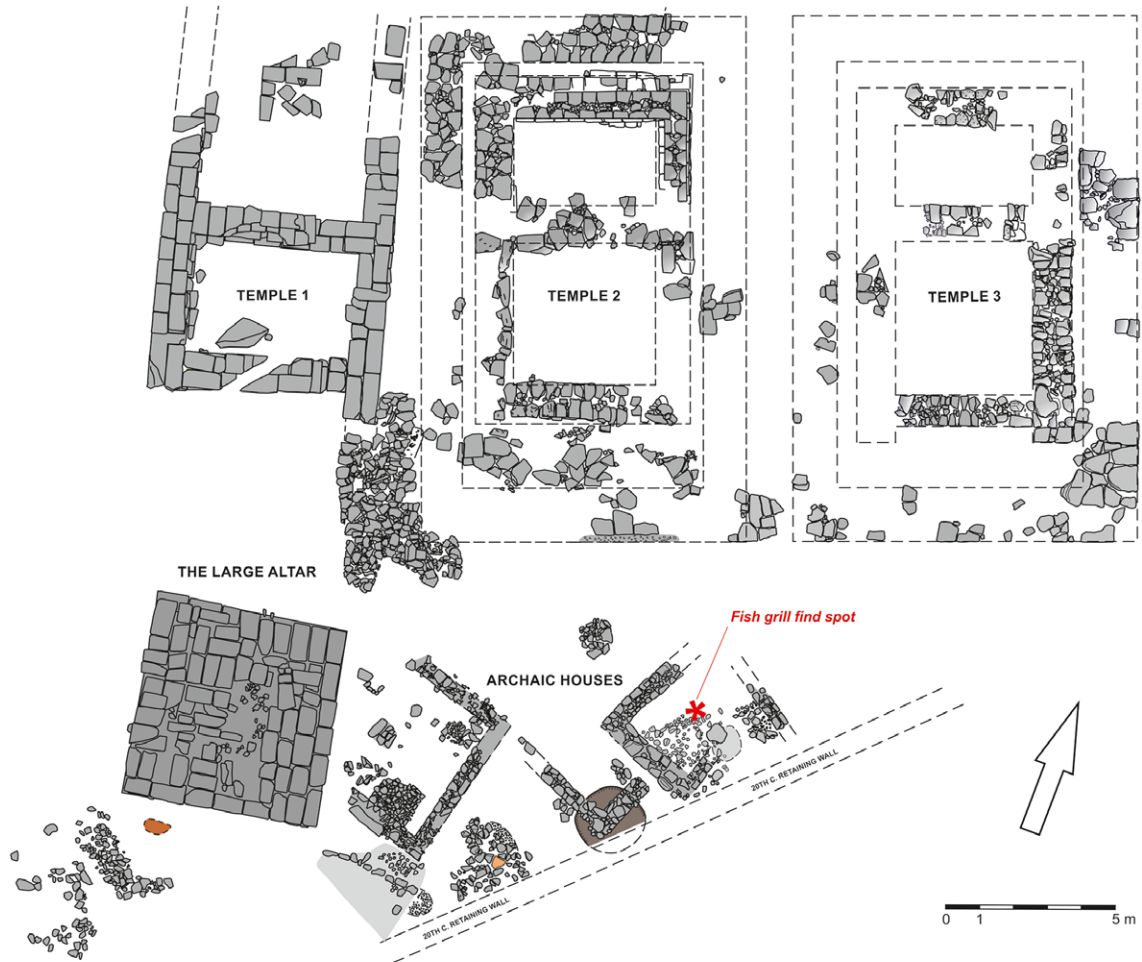


Fig. 3. Plan of part of the archaeological site with the find spot of the fish grill
(authors M. Damyanov, A. Kamenarov, S. Nenchev)

is best attested in the later Classical and Early Hellenistic necropolis. Presumably, this early grill was not locally made, but imported, most probably from Miletos. This is suggested, on the one hand, by the micaceous fabric that matches the description of the Milesian examples, and on the other, by the specific pattern of distribution of the early finds, almost exclusively in Miletos and Milesian colonies. Similarly, imported origin is also suggested for the grills from Berezan and Nymphaion.

Having filled the above-mentioned spatial gap, we are left with a chronological gap of about a century between the Late Archaic fish grills and the well-dated examples from early 4th c. BC ritual fireplaces in the Apollonian necropolis. What can be safely concluded is that the practice of using such utensils in Apollonia did not disappear during this poorly known period, which is very intriguing in the context of its presumed abandonment in Miletos and the lack of any evidence from the other Pontic colonies, at least for now.

While it would be good to have more published fish grills from well dated contexts, the available information could provide grounds for attempting to bridge the gap by means of typological observations.

Based on morphology, it is possible to make a clear distinction between some of the early Milesian grills and the later ones from the Apollonian necropolis. Among the specifics of the first group that comprises mainly large, more elaborately shaped grills are the triangular cut-outs on the base and the sides, as illustrated by most finds discussed above – from Miletos (Aydemir's cat 5 and 7), Naukratis,

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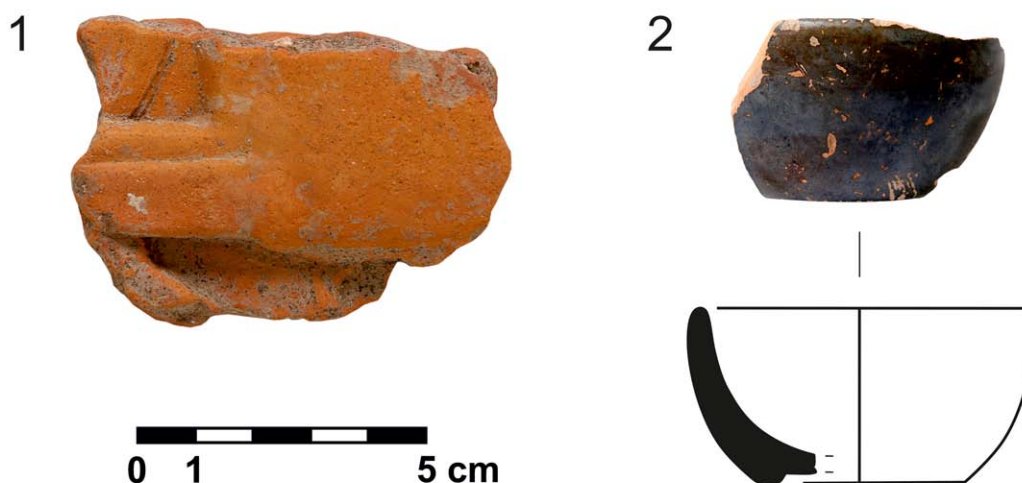


Fig. 4. Finds from the layer with the fish grill: 1. fragment of the figural frieze with warriors; 2. Attic black-glazed echinus wall saltcellar (author M. Damyanov)

Pantikapaion, Berezan (Chistov et al. 2015, fig. 5.7), Nymphaion, and now Apollonia. These grills resemble closely the outline of a fish. At the same time, the type with roughly rectangular cut-outs on the base is also attested – in Miletos (Aydemir’s cat. 6) and Berezan (Chistov et al. 2015, fig. 5.5–6). It would seem that this simpler design included also sides that were solid, without cut-outs. Both types seem to share the notched edge of the sides.

The Classical and Early Hellenistic grills display the morphology that is similar to the second type of the Archaic ones – rectangular cut-outs on the base, creating the specific barred design, and solid sides, without openings. They are, however, much more diverse in terms of size and care of manufacture. Most of the well-dated grills are more crudely made compared to the Archaic ones – down to very rudimentary examples that have almost completely departed from the original design (for example Ivanov 1963, no. 777; Claquin 2015, fig. 8.2). The general outline varies from more “fish-shaped”, pinched at the tail (for example Panayotova 2008, fig. 30), to more “boat-shaped” with parallel or almost parallel sides (for example Ivanov 1963, nos 772–773; Hermay et al. 2010, TC 1, pl. 123; Claquin 2015, fig. 8.3–6). There could hardly be any doubt that all of these grills were locally made.

An element that is shared by the Archaic and only some of the later fish grills is the notched top edge of the side walls. As already said, in the latter case, these are normally large and elaborately crafted examples (Nedyalkov 2020, 190, nos 276–277, Table 35–36; Baralis et al. 2019, 194–195, cat. 205), although some examples have more carelessly executed decoration (Ivanov 1963, nos 775–776).

Only hypothetically, the missing link between the Archaic and the Classical/Hellenistic fish grills could be sought for precisely in these large and carefully crafted examples, as they share most features with the early group – the size, the quality of manufacture, and the notched edge. Unfortunately, they lack secure context – the only available information is that one of the two published examples was discovered in the necropolis in Sozopol’s Harmanite neighbourhood in 1966; the other is of unknown provenance, but it is possible that it comes from the same general area. While not a decisive argument, it is worth reminding that Harmanite necropolis emerged earlier than the one in Kalfata and Budzhaka localities and functioned already in the first half of the 5th c. BC (or even earlier), providing the necessary chronological setting (see Damyanov 2021, 58–60).

On a side note, at the end of the discussion, it has been suggested that these notches on Archaic grills could have served to hold skewers with pieces of meat (Aydemir 2005, 93–94, Abb. 1). Their absence on most later grills, which are also in many cases too narrow to make such a use practical, speaks

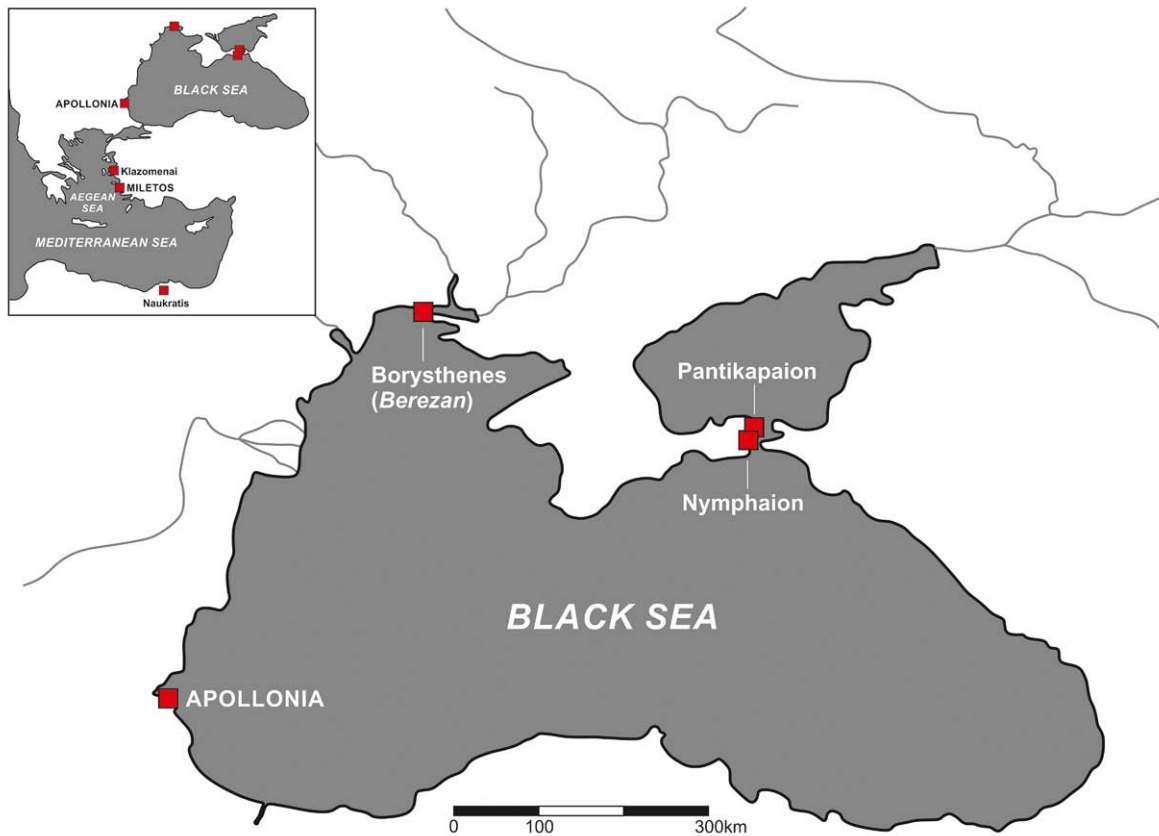


Fig. 5. Distribution map of published finds of Archaic fish grills (author M. Damyanov)

against such an interpretation. We cannot know with any certainty whether such a conclusion would hold true also for the Archaic grills.

Final remarks

One swallow does not a summer make, so why pay so much attention to a single fragmentary fish grill? Two reasons could be put forward. The first one is the very small number of (published) such finds from the ancient Greek world as a whole – less than a dozen of fragments from a handful of sites that however present a very consistent picture: an Archaic Milesian utensil that accompanied Milesians on their ventures overseas (fig. 5). It is only natural that Apollonia joins the other Milesian foundations in the Black Sea region, where such grills were discovered – Borysthenes (the island of Berezan), Pantikapaion, and Nymphaion. It is probably a matter of time for more finds from other Pontic sites (and also from Apollonia) to appear. It is a clear case of transfer of a cultural practice from metropolis to *apoikia*, as often taken for granted within the context of the Greek colonisation.

The second reason is the remarkable uniqueness of Apollonia in preserving this practice from Archaic to Hellenistic times, while it seems to have been abandoned at other places. The well-known fish grills from the necropolis date mainly from the 4th and early 3rd c. BC, and the newly found grill from the island of St Kirik offers the possibility to trace this practice back to the Archaic period. Hopefully, more investigations and detailed publications of already investigated sites in the ancient city would fill the gaps that remain in our understanding of the form and function of these artefacts in Apollonia Pontica.

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